

Montana Board of Land Commissioners

December 2008

Agency: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Land Interest: Fee Purchase

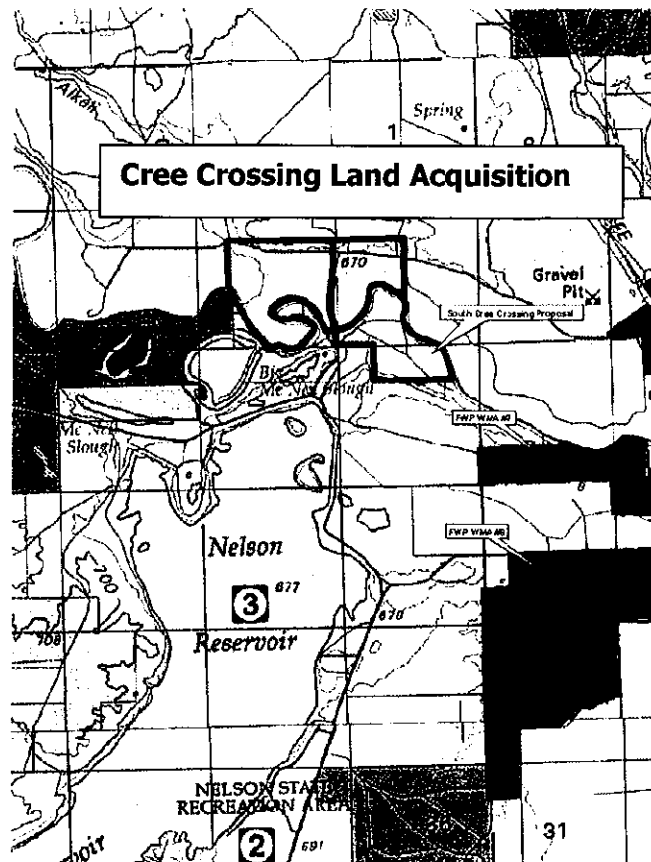
Project Description: FWP proposes to **purchase 400 acres of Milk River bottom land at Cree Crossing in Phillips County, about 25 miles northeast of Malta.** This acquisition is in a **priority conservation landscape** under the Department's Milk River Initiative. The property would be managed as part of the existing Milk River Wildlife Management Area (WMA), which includes several nearby units. Acquisition of the Cree Crossing property will **conserve important habitat** and provide **outstanding public recreational opportunities.**

Cost/Funding: **The price of the property is \$719,500, as established by independent appraisal.** Funding sources include FWP's Habitat Montana program, matched by federal funds from the USFWS State Wildlife Grants.

Resource Values: Habitats on the property consist of a **healthy riparian shrub and cottonwood forest community** along the Milk River, plus **wetlands and native range.** The property hosts a diversity of wildlife, including **whitetail and mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse, raptors pheasants, waterfowl, and many species of migratory songbirds.**

Use and Management: FWP anticipates **high public use** of the property for **hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing,** complementing the recreational opportunities available on nearby units of the Milk River WMA. Additionally, FWP is in discussion with the Bureau of Reclamation about **assuming management of 2,500 federal acres** adjacent to Nelson Reservoir. In conjunction with the river property secured at Cree Crossing, the result would be an **exceptional recreational complex for residents of north-central Montana.** Management of the existing agricultural fields on the Cree Crossing property would involve restoration of acreage to native habitat, along with some continued local agricultural use for crops and gamebird food plots.

Process: **FWP Draft Environmental Assessment** was released on October 15, 2008, and a public hearing was held in Malta on November 3. During the 30-day public comment period, FWP received 7 written comments and 25 e-mails in support of the acquisition and one written comment opposed to additional public land ownership. **Decision Notice** was issued by FWP on November 24, 2008, recommending purchase of the property. **FWP Commission approval** is anticipated on December 11, 2008.



The 400-acre Cree Crossing property, located 25 miles northeast of Malta, consists of the northern two parcels outlined above.



The Milk River forms the property's two-mile-long southern boundary.

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 11, 2008

Agenda Item: Cree Crossing (Milk River WMA) Fee Acquisition

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Approval of Final Action

Time for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

The Montana Glaciated Plains/Milk River Conservation and Restoration State Wildlife Grant (SWG) was approved on December 15, 2006, with a primary objective to *"Place 10,000 acres within the Milk River Riparian Zone under conservation easements or other appropriate strategies to conserve fish and wildlife communities including game and nongame species groups."* This effort along the Milk River is called the Milk River Initiative (MRI) and meshes perfectly with the riparian objectives of the Habitat Montana program. Acquisition of the Cree Crossing property will further address the MRI objective.

The 400-acre Cree Crossing property is located in Phillips County 22 miles northeast of Malta and one mile north of Nelson Reservoir. The property contains 245 acres of riparian habitat along nearly 2 miles of the Milk River. Uplands include 153 acres of cropland and range, with a 10-acre oxbow wetland. These diverse habitats support white-tailed deer, mule deer, pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, raptors, waterfowl, eight Montana Species of Concern, and many nongame species. Opportunities exist to stock turkeys and to access the Milk River for fishing.

FWP proposes to purchase the property at its appraised value of \$719,500 (\$1,800/acre). The ranch will be managed as part of the existing Milk River Wildlife Management Area (WMA) located one mile east. FWP is currently negotiating with the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) to manage 2,492 acres of BOR lands located between the WMA and this property, and adjacent to Nelson Reservoir.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The Environmental Assessment was published on October 15, 2008, and the 30-day public comment period ended November 13, 2008. A public hearing was held in Malta on November 3, 2008, with five attendees but no formal testimony given. FWP received 7 written comments and 25 e-mails in support of the acquisition and one written comment of opposition. The proposal was presented to the Phillips County Commissioners in early-October 2008. Their concerns related to possible tax revenue reduction and inflated farmland prices, but they understood that an out-of-area recreational buyer would likely purchase the ranch if FWP did not. FWP explained the in-lieu of property tax payment, and noted that a local landowner would likely be farming some of the property under FWP ownership. An FWP Decision Notice issued on November 24 recommends approval of the land purchase.

Alternatives and Analysis

Proposed Action: FWP proposes to purchase and manage the Cree Crossing property. The landowner has the property listed for sale, and is not interested in a conservation easement.

No Action Alternative: In the event that FWP does not buy the property, it is likely that a private recreational buyer will acquire the ranch. Opportunities for enhancement of wildlife habitat and public access could be lost.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

The Department recommends approval of fee title acquisition of the Cree Crossing Ranch for the price of \$719,500 plus closing costs, using available funding sources including Habitat Montana and SWG funds, to provide for conservation of this important Milk River habitat and compatible public access and recreational use.

Proposed Motion

I move that the Commission approve the Department's purchase of the Cree Crossing Ranch

**DECISION NOTICE
CREE CROSSING RANCH ACQUISITION**

**Prepared by Region 6, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
November 24, 2008**

PROPOSAL

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to purchase in fee-title the Cree Crossing Ranch. The ranch includes 400 deeded acres located 20 miles northeast of Malta, Montana, and one mile north of Nelson Reservoir, immediately across Cree Crossing along one and one-half miles of the Milk River. The ranch was purchased several years ago by an individual living out of the area, and is currently leased to a local landowner who farms it.

The acquisition is being proposed to protect, enhance and preserve the overall integrity of riparian habitats associated with the Milk River for present and future generations. The Milk River riparian corridor is key to maintaining stable and diverse wildlife populations, primarily because of the habitat quality for all seasonal habitats. Most of the surrounding uplands lack an effective winter cover component, making this project very important. The proposed acquisition is directed at conserving river bottom riparian and shrub grassland habitats. It also assures that general public hunting will continue to be the tool used to manage game populations. The ranch has not been open to free public hunting.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) PROCESS

The proposal has been outlined in an Environmental Assessment (EA) to satisfy the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). FWP is required to assess the impacts of the proposed action to the human and natural environment as directed by MEPA.

Under the MEPA process a 30-day public comment period ran from October 15 through November 13, 2008. During this period, a public hearing was held in Malta at the First State Bank meeting room at 7:00 PM on November 3, 2008.

ISSUES RAISED IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA)

No pertinent issues were raised during the 30-day public comment period of the EA process. The proposal was presented to the Phillips County Commissioners in early-October 2008. Their primary concern was about a possible reduction in tax revenue to the County, and the inflated price of farmland as the result of this type of acquisition. They also expressed the opinion that an out-of-area buyer would likely purchase the ranch anyway, if it was not sold to FWP. FWP assured them that the Department pays

annual property taxes at the current level and that a local landowner would likely be farming the property.

GENERAL SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

The public hearing was conducted on November 3, 2008 with three members of the public attending. Several questions were asked and answered. Two comments were made. There was no testimony for or against the acquisition of the Cree Crossing Ranch. In addition, seven written comments and 25 e-mails were received, all in favor of FWP acquiring the ranch. One written comment was opposed to the acquisition. This person expressed concern about the property no longer being available for acquisition by a local farmer/rancher, removing it from the County tax rolls, and general opposition to a government agency purchasing any more property.

DECISION

FWP fully supports the concept of protecting wildlife and agricultural values from development, subdivision and human encroachment. Approximately 75% of the Milk River Valley and associated riparian and shrub grassland habitats have been developed for agriculture and livestock production purposes. Recently, interests have started buying up land associated with the Milk River for recreational purposes. This often results in termination of public access and heightened game damage problems on neighboring farms and ranches. Unless actions are taken to preserve the remaining undeveloped or moderately developed areas along the Milk River, much of the private land that presently provides habitat, scenic values and public access will be lost.

After review of this proposal and corresponding public support, it is my recommendation to purchase in fee-title the Cree Crossing Ranch subject to approval by the FWP Commission and the State Land Board.



Patrick Gunderson
Region 6 Supervisor
Glasgow, Montana
November 24, 2008

**Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Wildlife Division**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
MANAGEMENT PLAN
SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT**

CREE CROSSING FEE TITLE PROPOSAL



October 2008



***Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks***

Region 6 Habitat Montana Project

I. INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes the purchase of approximately 400 acres of important wildlife habitat at Cree Crossing, located about 25 miles northeast of Malta near Nelson Reservoir. The property includes two miles of Milk River frontage and all the acreage is within the Milk River valley. The habitat consists of 224 acres of native vegetation and 170 acres of farmland. All of the native vegetation is riparian habitat, except for approximately 40 acres of upland habitat in a thin strip north of the county road. Riparian habitat consists of silver sagebrush grassland and cottonwood bottoms. It is expected that most of the farmland would be seeded to a native or introduced grass seed mix to provide dense nesting cover for pheasants and other upland game birds; however, some cropland is expected to be left under a cooperative agreement with a neighboring landowner to provide a food source for wildlife.

The Cree Crossing property is currently in private ownership, and has been listed for sale with a real estate agency. FWP negotiated the purchase of the property at its appraised value, which was established as \$719,500 through an independent appraisal commissioned by FWP. FWP will purchase the property using funds primarily from its Habitat Montana program. Some portion of the funding may also come from State Wildlife Grants, a federal program through which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provides funds to FWP for habitat conservation.

II. AUTHORITY AND DIRECTION

Montana FWP has the authority under State law (87-1-201, Montana Code Annotated) to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 526, which earmarked hunting license revenues to secure wildlife habitat through lease, conservation easement, or fee title acquisition (87-1-241 and 242, MCA). This is now referred to as the Habitat Montana program. As with other FWP property acquisition proposals, the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and the State Land Board (for properties greater than 100 acres or \$100,000) must approve any land acquisition proposal by the agency. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is part of that decision making process.

III. LOCATION OF PROJECT

The Cree Crossing property is located approximately 25 miles northeast of Malta and 1 mile north of Nelson Reservoir on the north side of historic Cree Crossing on the Milk River. It consists of 400 acres in two parcels separated by a county road. The west parcel consists of 271 acres, including 98 acres of farmland, while the east parcel consists of 120 acres, including 72 acres of farmland. All of the land involved is within deer/elk Hunting District 611. A map of the property is included as Appendix I in this document.

The purchase of this land would add to an existing complex of land in this area managed for wildlife habitat and public hunting. These lands include Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) managed by FWP and Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) and National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) as follows:

- McNeil Slough WPA (1220 acres) – adjacent on SW corner.
- Milk River WMA (1,343 acres) – 1/2 mile east.
- Hewitt Lake NWR (1040 acres) – 3.5 miles east.
- Beaver Creek WPA (2125 acres) – 8 miles south.
- Bowdoin NWR (15,551 acres) – 9 miles southwest
- Pearce WPA (536 acres) - 9 miles southwest

IV. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The primary purpose of this action is to preserve and enhance native habitats and to create more wildlife habitat for a variety of game and nongame species. This property would be managed as a WMA to enhance and protect fish and wildlife resources. The primary habitats represented on the property include riparian corridors, wetlands and grasslands. By improving and increasing the existing habitat, wildlife use, including white-tailed deer, ring-necked pheasants, Merriam's turkeys, mourning doves, sharp-tailed grouse, several species of ducks, and a wide variety of native species of migratory birds, songbirds, small mammals and bats is expected to increase in the future.

There are currently several farms along the Milk River for sale at prices that prohibit the purchase of this land by local agricultural producers. These farms are being marketed based on their recreational values and proximity to the Milk River and, once purchased, new landowners have typically closed off any public recreational opportunities. This land's proximity to Nelson Reservoir also makes it an attractive opportunity for a private party to purchase it for subdivision development into future home or cabin sites. By converting this land into a WMA the public would have a high quality area for hunting, fishing, bird watching and other recreational uses in perpetuity.

A second purpose is to guarantee public access to this land for hunting and other recreational pursuits. In recent years public access along the Milk River bottom has become very restricted due to changes in landownership. Much of the land along the Milk River is now owned by nonresidents who purchased land for exclusive private hunting areas. Acquisition of the Cree Crossing property will open and promote public recreation and will provide additional access to the Milk River. A popular fishing area on the Milk River occurs on this land immediately east of the Cree Crossing Bridge.

Thus, the need for this project is twofold. The first need is to secure habitats for wildlife from the threat of development, while the second need is to secure perpetual public use of this land for hunters, fishermen and other recreationists. Resident and migrating wildlife species would benefit from improved habitat conditions, while hunters and other recreationists would gain access to this land and to the adjacent Milk River.

V. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is for FWP to purchase this 400-acre parcel for use as a Wildlife Management Area for the price of \$719,500. Cattle grazing would be generally excluded, although periodically cows may be grazed for management purposes. Approximately 40 acres of upland pasture occurs in a thin strip along a hillside north of the county road. Due to its location and size, this small portion of the property provides minimum hunting opportunities and would be difficult to manage. FWP will work with the adjacent landowner and either sell this land at a market rate, lease it for grazing or obtain management authority over additional riparian habitat through an exchange-of-use agreement.

Most of the existing 170 acres of farmland would be converted into native or introduced grasses to increase wildlife habitat on the land; however, it is expected that some farmland would continue to be farmed under an agreement with a neighboring landowner with a portion of the crop left as food plots. There are sufficient water rights with the land to irrigate 50 acres in any given year by pumping out of the Milk River. It is expected that these water rights will be used to create more wetland habitat and/or irrigate cropland and food plots to support more wildlife. Additional costs to develop habitat on this property would primarily be paid for through MFWP's Habitat Montana and the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Programs. There may also be opportunities to secure funding for habitat projects from various nonprofit conservation organizations.

Possible habitat improvement projects on this land include:

- (1) Planting native or introduced grasses on some of the existing farmland to provide more nesting cover.
- (2) Planting wildlife food plots.
- (3) Planting wildlife shelterbelts.
- (4) Creating shallow wetland habitats.
- (5) Controlling or eradicating noxious weeds.

VI. DESCRIPTION OF REASONABLE ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

The intent of this action is to create a WMA on this 400-acre parcel of land. This will preserve and enhance wildlife habitat on this land and provide for numerous high quality recreational opportunities. Since this land is currently for sale the only other alternative considered in this EA is the "No Action Alternative".

1. No Action Alternative

If the Department does not purchase this land it will be sold to another buyer. Since this land is being marketed based on its recreational value it

would most likely be purchased as a private hunting area or for future subdivision into home or cabin sites. Residential developments on this area would result in an increased loss of native habitats, especially cottonwood river bottoms, which are used extensively by many wildlife species. Due to the high price of Milk River bottomland it is very unlikely that a traditional farmer or rancher could afford to buy this land for agricultural production.

VII. EXISTING ENVIRONMENT

This property is currently owned by individuals who live out of the area and who purchased this land from the original landowner several years ago for exclusive hunting. In recent years a neighboring landowner has leased the farm land as part of his agricultural operations. Wildlife species currently occurring on this property include: white-tailed deer, mule deer, ring-necked pheasants, Merriam's turkeys, mourning doves, sharp-tailed grouse, several species of ducks, and a wide variety of native species of migratory birds, songbirds, small mammals and bats.

VIII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. Land Resources

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action land resources within the property would be protected and managed for fish and wildlife habitat values and recreational use. There is substantial value in conserving wildlife habitat and open space within the Milk River valley.

No Action: Under this alternative the land would be sold to another buyer and there would be the potential for subdivision, clearing of timber, increased cultivation and/or managing the land solely for private recreation. The No Action alternative will not address a growing problem of decreasing public access to wildlife and recreation. Development of this property could result in the loss or disturbance of important fish and wildlife habitats.

2. Air Resources

Proposed Action: There would be no impact.

No Action: There would be no immediate impact.

3. Water Resources

Proposed Action: There would be no impact of water resources in perpetuity, as they would remain the same on the land. Current agricultural uses on the property have proven to be compatible with maintenance of water quality along the Milk River and would continue that way under the proposed action. Restoration activities associated with the proposed action will positively impact riparian habitat quality in these locations.

No Action: It is likely that there would be no immediate impacts and that water resources on this land would continue to be managed for limited commercial agricultural purposes on the developed fields.

4. Vegetation Resources

Proposed Action: This action would result in an improvement to the diversity, quantity and quality of native vegetation on the land parcel. Cattle grazing would be excluded from cottonwood draws and vegetation where winter-feeding occurred in the past would slowly recover. Most of the current cropland would be planted back to native grasses or a mixture of introduced grasses and legumes to provide dense nesting cover for upland game birds. Noxious weed management will be an important component of a successful farm operation and would be under the guidance of the 2008 FWP Integrated Weed Management Plan.

No Action: Under this alternative it is likely that future owners of this land would continue to manage this parcel for agriculture and as a private hunting area; however, at some point in the future this land could be subdivided into cabin or home sites along the Milk River. If this was to occur, impacts to native vegetation could be significant.

5. Fish/Wildlife Resources

Proposed Action: This action will benefit a variety of wildlife by conserving, enhancing and protecting wildlife habitat on this parcel. Because this land will be managed intensively for wildlife it is expected that there will be significant increases in populations of both game species and nongame species of wildlife on this land.

No Action: Under this alternative the land would be sold and used either as a private hunting area and/or developed into home or cabin sites along the Milk River. If development occurs, open space could diminish over time resulting in significant long-term negative effects to most species of wildlife. Wildlife species would also be negatively impacted by the conversion of existing native vegetation to other uses.

7. Adjacent Land

Proposed Action: No negative impact is expected. Existing fences would be maintained along the perimeter of the property. Although there would likely be an increase in white-tailed deer numbers, public hunting would allow for management of deer numbers, which would prevent depredation on adjacent lands.

No Action: This land would be sold to another buyer, who would likely not allow any free public hunting. This would likely result in an increase in white-tailed deer depredation problems on adjacent private lands.

IX. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

1. Noise/Electrical Effects

Proposed Action: The proposed project would result in more people visiting the site, but this should have no significant impact on noise levels or electrical effects.

No Action: It is likely that no immediate impact would occur.

2. Land Use

Proposed Action: Currently this property is a limited commercial agricultural operation and a private recreational property. Under the proposed action the area would be managed for fish and wildlife habitat in perpetuity by balancing limited agricultural operations with improving forage and cover for wildlife species, which should have no impact to surrounding land uses or residences.

No Action: Changes in future landownership and land use could affect habitat quality and current wildlife numbers. There would likely be no public recreational opportunities

3. Risk/Health Hazards

Proposed Action: No impact would occur. Big game hunting would be limited to shotgun, muzzleloader, traditional handgun or archery only to minimize hunting accidents as a result of stray bullets. FWP Game Wardens would enforce state hunting laws on the new WMA.

No Action: No impact would occur.

4. Community Impacts

Proposed Action: The proposed action would eliminate potential residential development of this natural area and would provide public recreational access to this property and the Milk River. The creation of a private hunting preserve would be averted. Increased public access to recreation may provide additional outdoor recreation-based revenues for businesses in Phillips County. This issue is also addressed in the attached Socio-Economic Assessment (See Appendix III).

No Action: With this alternative, the land would be sold and could be subdivided into cabin or home sites. If this was to occur there would be a short-term economic benefit, but the costs of providing services to rural residents typically far exceed these short-term economic returns.

5. Public Services/Taxes/Utilities

Proposed Action: There would be no changes or need for increased public services in the property area. FWP would make payments to Phillips County for fee title lands in lieu of property taxes that are assessed for this property.

No Action: No immediate impacts are expected to occur. If rural subdivision did occur in the future, greater demands would be placed on county resources.

6. Aesthetics/Recreation

Proposed Action: The creation of a WMA on this land would result in a positive impact to both aesthetics and recreation in this portion of the Milk River Valley. High quality public hunting and fishing opportunities would be created and maintained in perpetuity. The natural beauty of the Milk River frontage would also be enhanced and maintained. This issue is also addressed in the attached Socio-Economic Assessment (Appendix III).

No Action: It is likely that public recreational opportunities would continue to be nonexistent on this land. Should rural subdivision and/or other development occur, it would reduce the aesthetic and recreational quality of the area.

7. Cultural/Historic Resources

Proposed Action: A cultural resources report will be requested from the State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) to determine if any known

cultural resources exist on this site. Specific protection actions will be considered once a SHPO report is received.

No Action: There known cultural or historic resources in the area that could be affected by residential development of this land.

X. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE

The proposed action should have no negative cumulative effect on the physical and human environment. This action will have a long-term positive impact on wildlife management, riparian habitats, open space and public recreation.

The "No Action Alternative" would not preserve the diversity of wildlife habitats in perpetuity. Possible future subdivisions or other actions could negatively affect wildlife habitat and populations and detract from the natural aesthetics of this area. It is highly unlikely that any public recreation would occur under this alternative.

XI. EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN EIS

Based on the above assessment, which has not identified any significant impacts from the proposed action pursuant to ARM 12.2.431, an EIS is not required and an EA is the appropriate level of review. The overall impact from the successful completion of the proposed action would provide substantial long-term benefits to both the physical and human environment.

XII. OVERLAPPING JURISDICTION

SHPO is responsible for the implementation of the National Historic Preservation Act and the Montana State Antiquities Act on state own properties. FWP will consult with SHPO before beginning projects that involve ground disturbing activities to ensure cultural and historic resources are preserved.

XIII. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The public comment period will begin October 15, 2008 and run through November 13, 2008. Written comments may be submitted to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Attn: Cree Crossing Acquisition
54078 Hwy 2 West
Glasgow, MT 59230

Or comments can be emailed to jelletson@mt.gov.

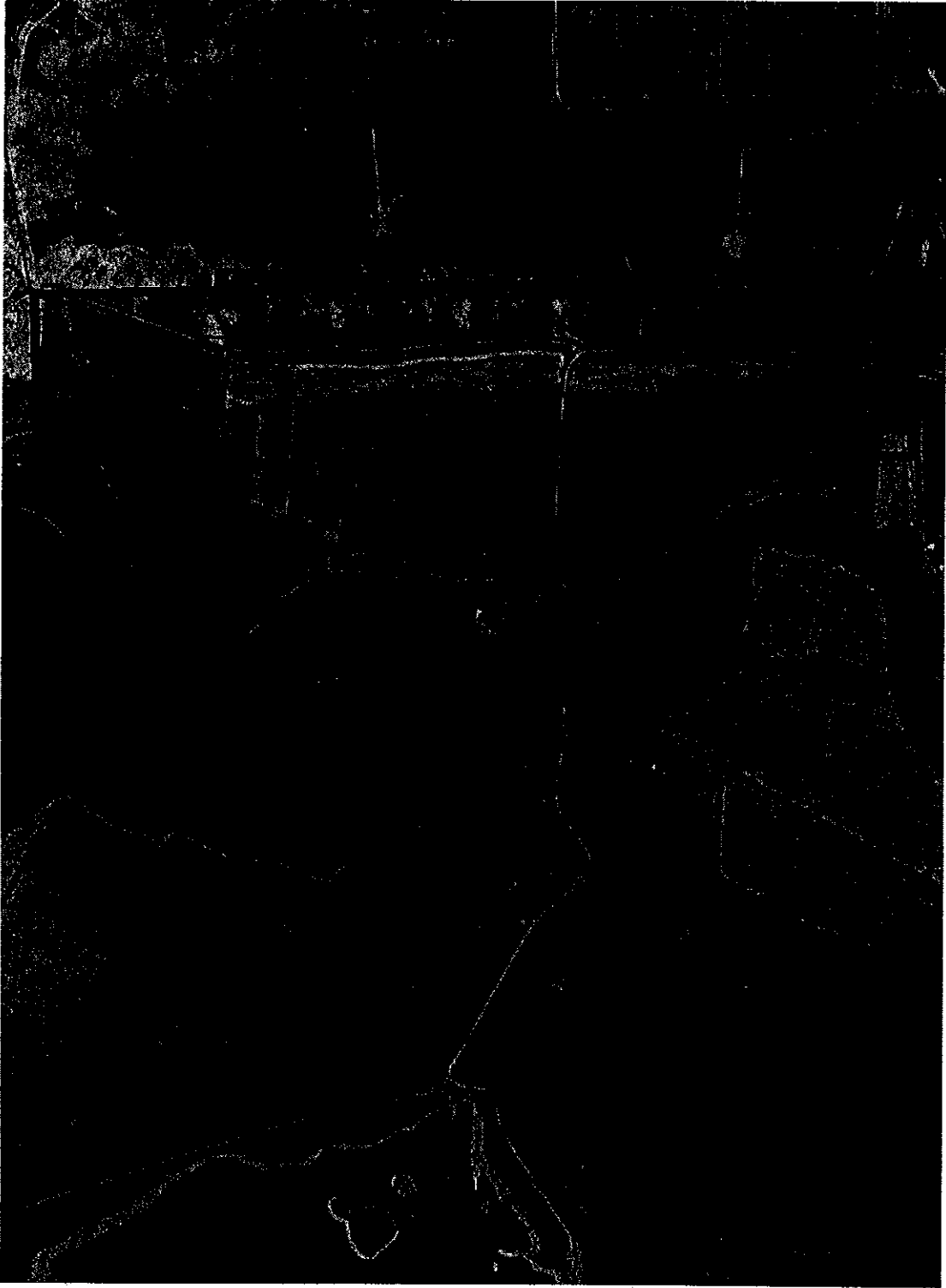
In addition, there will be a public hearing in Malta on November 3, 2008 at the First State Bank meeting room at 7:00 PM.

XIV. PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR PREPARING THIS EA

Mark Sullivan, Malta Wildlife Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, P.O. Box 457, Malta, MT 59538. 406-654-1183.

APPENDIX I

Cree Crossing Property Map



APPENDIX II

CREE CROSSING RANCH ACQUISITION

PROPOSED MANAGEMENT PLAN

October 2008

A. INTRODUCTION, STATEMENT OF PURPOSE & RESOURCE VALUES

Introduction:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes the purchase of approximately 400 acres of important wildlife habitat along the Milk River near Nelson Reservoir. The property includes two miles of Milk River frontage and all the acreage is within the Milk River valley. The habitat consists 245 acres of native vegetation and 170 acres of farmland. Most of the native vegetation is riparian habitat and consists of silver sagebrush grassland and cottonwood bottoms.

This Proposed Management Plan will provide an overview of the proposed project, a summary of the fish and wildlife resources residing in this area, and a description of the purpose, objectives and management strategies that will be used to meet initial conservation objectives. As this is a 'proposed' property acquisition, detailed management objectives and strategies will be identified and incorporated in the event that the Proposed Action is achieved. It is intended that this Plan will be periodically updated to ensure that the project continues to fulfill the identified purpose(s).

Statement of Purpose:

This property would be managed primarily as a *Wildlife Management Area* (WMA) to protect fish and wildlife resources and to provide public access to approximately 400 acres of Milk River bottom and 2 miles of Milk River frontage. Wildlife habitat on this land would be enhanced to maximize hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Resource Values:

The resource value is high based on the desirable quantities and qualities of productivity. According to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), riparian and wetland communities support the greatest concentration of plants and animals, yet only constitute 4 percent of Montana's land cover. There are 149 avian species, 22 mammal species, 16 amphibian species, and 6 reptile species that depend on riparian and wetland habitat for breeding and survival, and many of them occur on this property. An additional 72 species thrive in these habitats and benefit from riparian and wetland conservation (*Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy, Executive Summary, 2005*). Available at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, MT 59620, or by internet at: <http://fwp.mt.gov/specieshabitat/strategy/summaryplan.html>.

Because hunters are funding this easement, game species will be used as indicator species and are prioritized as follows based on habitat availability and potential in this area: whitetail deer, ring-necked pheasants, waterfowl (i.e., wood ducks, mallard, green-winged teal, blue-winged teal, northern shoveler, gadwall, American wigeon) and mourning doves. Additionally, State Wildlife Grants will provide FWP the opportunity to survey and inventory riparian-associated wildlife species in order to develop a baseline assessment of species richness and diversity.

B. GOALS, OBJECTIVES, PROBLEMS, AND STRATEGIES

GOAL: To protect and increase riparian habitat along the Milk River to:

- Maintain and enhance native plant and animal species diversity within the project area.
- Enhance public hunting opportunities in the project area.
- Enhance other public outdoor recreational opportunities.

Management Strategies

Objective 1: Protect and enhance native riparian habitats and biodiversity within the project area.

Issue 1: Winter-feeding of livestock has concentrated cattle in some areas resulting in a reduction of woody cover, an increase in nonnative vegetation and compaction of soils.

Strategy 1: No livestock will be wintered on this property and any livestock grazing which does occur will only be done periodically for management purposes. Native vegetation, especially trees and shrub cover are expected to slowly recover; however, it will take many years for these areas to fully recover.

Strategy 2: FWP will assess the native habitat and identify and potential habitat improvement projects that may be necessary to maximize fish and wildlife habitat on the property.

Issue 2: Noxious weeds, primarily leafy spurge, are present in cottonwood bottoms at low densities.

Strategy: FWP will locate and map weed infestations on this property. Weed control will be done by FWP or contracted to the Phillips County Weed Control Supervisor with a goal of significant weed reduction and eventually eradication. Both biological and chemical control methods may be used.

Issue 3: Approximately 40 acres of upland pasture occurs in a thin strip along a hillside north of the county road. Due to the location and size of this property it provides minimum hunting opportunities and would be difficult to manage.

Strategy: FWP will work with the adjacent landowner and either sell this land at a market rate, lease it for grazing or obtain management authority over additional riparian habitat through an exchange-of-use agreement.

Objective 2: Manage the existing 158 acres of cropland and 12 acres of alfalfa as high quality wildlife food production and/or nesting cover.

Issue: Approximately 170 acres of farmland exist on the property, of which 120 acres are ditched and leveled for irrigation. There is a pumping contract that allows up to 50 acres to be irrigated each year.

Strategy 1: Part of this farmland will be seeded into either dense nesting cover, using a mixture of introduced grasses (i.e. tall wheatgrass, intermediate wheatgrass, pubescent wheatgrass and alfalfa), or a native grass mixture to provide more habitat for pheasants and other wildlife species.

Strategy 2: It is expected that some of this farmland will be maintained to provide a food source for many wildlife species. In this event a local producer will be contracted to farm the land and leave part of the crop standing as wildlife food plots.

Strategy 3: It may be possible to create more shallow wetland habitat using irrigation water in the pumping contract.

Strategy 4: Wildlife shelterbelts may be planted on some irrigated land to provide winter cover for pheasants and enhance hunting opportunities.

Objective 3: Maximize public recreational use of the property while ensuring compatibility with neighboring private landowners to minimize impacts on adjacent private lands.

Issue 1: In recent years there has been a marked decrease in public recreation opportunities within the Milk River valley due to changes in landownership. In the past 10 years most of the land sold within the Milk River valley has been purchased by out-of-state hunters for their own private hunting area and this trend continues today.

Strategy 1: If FWP purchases this land it will be managed as a WMA and will provide recreational opportunities to the public in perpetuity.

Strategy 2: Hunting opportunities for all game species will be increased by the habitat practices mentioned above.

Issue 2: An increase in public use of this property will result in more activity next to private lands adjacent to this parcel.

Strategy 1: Parking areas will be created off the North-South county road and away from neighboring lands to the east and west. All hunting will be by walk-in only.

Strategy 2: Big game hunting will be limited to archery, shotgun, traditional handgun or muzzleloader to minimize the potential of stray bullets.

Strategy 3: Property boundaries will be well marked to avoid confusion by hunters and to minimize trespass problems.

Issue 3: Dispersal of game animals onto neighboring lands.

Strategy 1: Irrigated river bottom food plots should help hold animals on this property and minimize potential problems with adjoining landowners.

Strategy 2: Properly managed hunting will help keep animal populations in check at reasonable levels.

Strategy 3: FWP will work with neighbors who qualify for game damage assistance with any potential wildlife game damage issues.

MONITORING

An annual work plan would be developed, and would be a yearly addendum to the Management Plan. The Work Plan will identify strategies in the Management Plan and develop projects that will address the stated objectives.

APPENDIX III

CREE CROSSING PROPERTY
FEE TITLE ACQUISITION
SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

OCTOBER 2008

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, conservation easements or leases. In 1989 the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when wildlife habitat is acquired using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the fee title transfer of the Cree Crossing property to FWP using funding provided by the Habitat Montana program. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting, as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed fee title acquisition.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description and Surroundings

The Cree Crossing property consists of 400 acres in Phillips County about 25 miles NE of Malta. This property is located just north of the Nelson Reservoir, one of the most popular fishing and recreation areas in northern Montana's Hi-Line region. The Nelson Reservoir complex also includes considerable amount of public recreational property owned by the federal Bureau of Reclamation. A more detailed description of the Cree Crossing property is included in the environmental assessment (EA).

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The habitat of the property is a mixture of agricultural crop land, native cottonwood riparian forest and a small amount of native rangeland. This property provides important habitat for a large number of wildlife species both seasonally and year-round, including whitetail and mule deer, pheasant, waterfowl and a variety of nongame species.

C. Current Use

The Cree Crossing property has been managed as mix of irrigated farmland and native pasture. Historically cattle grazed the property seasonally, and crops were produced on about 120 acres. The current owner has worked to improve riparian habitat conditions, and has severely limited cattle grazing on the property.

D. Management Alternatives

- 1) Purchase the property fee title
- 2) No purchase

FWP Fee Title Purchase

The purpose of FWP's proposed Cree Crossing land purchase is preserve and enhance native habitats supporting a variety of game and nongame species, and to ensure public access to this land for hunting, wildlife viewing and other recreational pursuits.

No Purchase Alternative

The no purchase alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what future owners decide to do with the property. There is potential for either intensive agricultural use or, because of the property's high-quality habitat and proximity to Nelson Reservoir, for development into a recreational/residential subdivision.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat and consistent management of this land. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the two management alternatives following two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the fee title transfer to MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e. income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has agreed to purchase fee title to this property for \$719,500, with funding primarily provided by the Habitat Montana program. The property will be managed as part of the Department's wildlife management area program.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the fee title purchase. The sale of this land and subsequent title transfer to FWP will not change the tax revenues that Phillips County currently collects on the real property (400 acres) involved in the sale. FWP is required by Montana Code 87-1-603 to pay "to the county a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen." Current taxes on this land amounted to \$586 per year for 2007, although these taxes included an assessment for a 1976 mobile home that has since been removed from the property by its owner.

B. Economic Impacts

There will not be any significant financial impacts to local businesses associated with the fee title purchase of this land and subsequent ownership by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. The property may draw increased sportsmen use to the area in its role as a public hunting area. Crop

production would decrease because most of the current cropland would eventually be planted back to native grasses or to a mixture of introduced grasses and legumes to provide dense nesting cover for upland game birds. In the short term, FWP may contract with a local producer to farm the land through a sharecropping arrangement, allowing the producer to harvest some of the crop while leaving part of the crop standing as wildlife food plots.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The fee title purchase and title transfer of the 400-acre Cree Crossing property to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks will provide long-term protection for important Milk River riparian wildlife habitat, maintain the open space integrity of the land, and enhance public recreation opportunities in this important recreational area. The fee title purchase of the property by FWP will not cause a reduction in property tax revenues to Phillips County. Overall financial impacts to local business will be minimal in relation to the anticipated increase in recreational use and the slight decrease in agricultural production.